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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 203 (2015) 163 – 167

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY CHALLENGES - TEACHERS  
FOR THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY - 3RD EDITION, EPC-TKS 2015

## Primary School Children's Emotional Intelligence

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### Abstract

Emotional intelligence is an extremely important tool used to solve certain issues of school activities and interpersonal relationships. The development of emotional intelligence becomes an educational goal starting from the earliest ages of children. The goals of the school subject "Personal Development", included in the preschool and primary school curriculum, deal with the components of emotional intelligence. The interest shown in self-knowledge and the positive attitude towards themselves and the others, as well as the adequate expression of their emotions while interacting with both children and adults they know, are general skills which include emotional intelligence components. This survey is the result of a research carried out among students in the first grade of primary school concurrently with a training program intended to develop emotional abilities in children. The following methods were applied during this study: observation, talk, questionnaire, pedagogical experiment. Our intense educational activities were focused on concrete affective experiences, using suggestive didactical materials, combining the expression with the analysis of basic emotions, which helped children find slight differences between basic emotions and better identify the determining factors of these emotions.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of EPC-TKS 2015.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence; basic emotion; emotional ability; emotional expression

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### 1. Introduction

Coordinated by the neural centers situated in the limbic system, emotional intelligence interacts with intellectual intelligence and most often the latter supports and supplements the former. Being considered a "sentinel of the mental activity", emotional intelligence is a tool used by man to master or conduct his own behaviors, to exercise

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interpersonal relationships, to overcome internal or external obstacles and to adjust him in the environment around. Emotional intelligence is a prompt and efficient tool therefore its development becomes a goal in the education of youngest students.

The optimal functioning of emotional intelligence, in correlation with the optimal functioning of intellectual intelligence, is a guarantee of being successful in the activities performed with young children and in their interactions and optimal adjustment in the multitude of internal and external demands, in their personal happiness and in the right way to social harmony. All the theorists who elaborated on emotional intelligence pinpointed the correlated development of these two types of intelligence.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

According to the model developed by Goleman in 2001, any educational program focused on emotional intelligence should deal with its main dimensions which we list below:

- the awareness of own emotions (the ability to recognize and name them, the ability to identify the causes of emotions, the ability to anticipate possible behaviors and actions);
- the self-control or the control of own emotions (the ability to master your negative emotions, the ability to adequately express your emotions, the ability to charge yourself with positive emotions, the ability to handle stress to your own favor, the ability to escape distress, depression and anxiety);
- the personal motivation (the ability to use your own emotions in a productive way, the ability to concentrate yourself and maintain yourself focused on your task, the ability to manage your impulsivity);
- the empathy (the ability to take another person's perspective on thoughts, emotions and actions, the ability to listen to the other with all of your senses);
- the social relations management (the ability to understand interpersonal relationships, solve conflicts and bargain disputes, settle disagreements in your relationship with the others, the ability to be open-minded, assertive and positive, to cooperate, to responsibly involve yourself, to be helpful, kind, mindful and polite).

Any educational program pursuing the development of emotional intelligence shall take account not only of the affective development, but also of the intellectual development of the age of the students concerned. Emotions start accompanying children's emotions when they are just three or four years old, whether in playing, learning, interacting, fulfilling the tasks given to them by adults. Around the age of 4 or 5, children experience, identify and differentiate anger, sadness, fear, happiness, shame, pride, guilt (based on facial expression). After the age of 6, children change their affective vocabulary, mainly in terms of quantity and diversity of the notions defining emotions. Children become able to talk with other people about their own emotions and they can listen to what the others say, in their turn, about the emotions of the children. They are also able to perceive the diversity and complexity of emotional expressions and, most important, they become aware that their emotions are generated by certain causes which produce consequences on their own behavior and that of other people. Emotions start accompanying everything preschool or primary school children do, whether in playing, educational activities, practice learning and art activities or fulfilling the tasks given to them by adults. They progressively build their affective vocabulary and create the possibility to valorize emotions.

Most of the psychologists specialized in the study of emotional intelligence and the psychology of emotions (P. Ekman, 2011, J. Cosnier, 2007, M. Zlate, 2000) believe that the basic emotions are the following: happiness, surprise, sadness, fear, anger; to these are added shame, guilt, despise, despair, curiosity. All these basic emotions are involved in the settlement of the fundamental issues of current life, which demands prompt reaction. The expression of the basic emotions is universal therefore they can be quickly and correctly recognized. These multiple emotional expressions (facial expression, gesture, posture, tone of voice) are consistent. Understanding them is not equally easy at every age of the children.

### 3. Research methodology

Our research (both empirical and applicative) was focused on a certain component of the emotional intelligence, namely on the ability of primary school students to identify the basic emotions, based on a correlated interpretation of all the emotional expressions (facial expressions, gestures, postures, tones of voice). The goals we pursued in this survey were the following:

- the identification of those basic emotions of which primary school children can be aware;
- the identification of the main types of emotional expressions based on which primary school children become aware of the other people's experiences;
- the analysis of the primary school student to identify the determining factors of the other people's emotions;
- the formation of the ability to "read" and respect the emotions of the other people.

In our investigation we applied the following methodology: observation, direct talk, questionnaire, pedagogical experiment. Our pedagogical experiment implemented a training program focused on exercising the analysis of certain emotional expressions, the emotional charging and discharging, the play-role. Our investigation was carried on a sample of 30 first-grade schoolchildren studying at School no. 1 in Buzau.

### 4. Results

The school subject "Personal Development" which is now included in the first grade curriculum proposes the formation of an important emotional ability for self-knowledge and inter-knowledge – the adequate expression of emotions within a context of interaction between children and adults. This ability also includes the ability to associate the basic emotions with simple nonverbal and paraverbal language elements. In the process of formation of these abilities we work with the following basic emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger; we also work with simple emotional expressions such as: facial expression, posture, tone of voice.

In order to acknowledge the children's ability to identify the basic emotions, we showed them the 14 photographs proposed by Paul Ekman in 2011, where they could look at the facial expressions that reflect the basic emotions. These photographs express sadness (1,3,12), disgust (2,7), satisfaction (4), anger, annoyance (5,9,11,13), fear (6,10), grief (8). According to our survey, the children were able to distinguish precisely between positive and negative emotions. However, they could not distinguish among the several negative emotions; all the children considered them to be nothing but sadness.

We also proposed the same emotional experiences to the first-grade children, using a number of much more complex pictures (individuals shown in concrete physical and human situations) which illustrate not only the facial expression, but also the gesture, the posture and the body position of a person. In this case, the children were able to distinguish between sorrow and disgust, between sorrow and sadness. They could identify anger very quickly. We found that, in general, the 7-8-year-old children looked more carefully at the facial expression of the character shown in the photo, not at the other emotional expressions. Mimicking expressions was even more difficult for the students in the first grade of primary school because it was only based on the mimic mouth exercise.

Furthermore, we exercised, in a very simplistic manner, the identification of the determining factors which release emotions: the children were tempted to establish a connection between these factors and their affective experience which was polarized into positive and negative experiences. Therefore, in the next stage, we proposed them some representative scenes from a few well-known fairy tales ("Little Red Riding Hood", "Snow White", "The Goat and Her Three Kids", "The Three Little Pigs"). In this case, the analysis of the causes of emotional experiences was very accurate.

The training program was carried out with the purpose to form the following abilities in children: the ability to identify and mimic the basic emotions and the ability to identify the causes of these emotions included stories (with people, adults and children, and animals), play role, exercising emotional expression through visual arts, emotional analysis of the artistic products made by classmates, seeing theater performances.

The new expressive element used by us within this program, associated to the previous elements, was the tone of the voice. The animals experiencing the basic emotions pictures, taken from the book "Do Animals Have Feelings Too?" written by David L. Rice and illustrated by Trudy Calvert in 2009, proved to be extremely valuable tool. Moreover, in our training program we included a number of play exercises, such as:

- *Vocabulary of emotions*

The children were given a set of cards with the name of the emotion on one side and two images on the other side: one corresponding to the name on the other side and another one which was neuter. The task was to choose the right image for the respective emotion and to find corresponding words (adjectives, verbs, nouns, interjections) for it.

- *The sounds of emotions*

This game was played in three variants. We proposed some pieces of music (songs for children, but also from some pieces from classical music which are accessible at their age) which they associated to different emotions. On the respective musical background the children expressed their emotion through dance. In the second variant of the game, the children correlated the basic emotions with the sounds they produced themselves (the sound of a whistle, the sound produced by two stones they hit, the sound of drum hitting, that of tree-branch breaking or tearing a piece of cardboard). In the third variant of the game, we had some tape recordings from nature played (the sound of a thunder, the singing of a blackbird, the noise of a mountain river, the sound of the ocean during a storm). The children had the task to name the corresponding emotion. At the end, they expressed, through drawings/paintings the emotions they had when they heard the respective sounds.

- *The five enjoyable activities*

Each student made a list with 5 activities he/she prefers and another list with the 5 activities preferred by his/her desk-mate. In the second part of the game the children compared the lists to see to what extent the class-mates knew each other. Another variant highlighted the preferred objects. All the lists were displayed for a month to allow the children to identify the ways for improving the emotional state of their mates.

- *Colors of emotions*

The game proposed to the children to choose the colors which correspond to each emotion; in the second part of the game each student represented a happy or sad event in a drawing, using the adequate colors.

- *The purpose of the good deed*

This game was aimed at forming/consolidating the positive self image based on some desirable deeds/behaviors occurred recently. The techniques used during the game were personal reflection, conversation, mimicry. The children described each a recent good deed/behavior, describing the actual context, the emotion experienced, the reactions of the other participants. Their class-mates asked them about the reasons for doing that deed or adopting that behavior.

In a variant of the same game, the children had to describe a deed done by another person, which generated a negative emotion in them. The game ended with the listing, working individually or in teams, of the things which generally make people happy and those which bother them.

- *The game of compliments*

This game was used to develop the children's skills to communicate positive appreciation to the others for their good results in learning, for their good behavior or nice clothing.

- *The sentence filling exercise*

This exercise aimed to highlight to the children some of the factors which generate our emotions and the way we can control the negative ones.

## 5. Conclusion

During our investigation, we carried out intense educational activities which were focused on concrete affective experiences, using suggestive didactical materials and combining the expression with the analysis of basic emotions. At the end, the children in the first grade of the primary school no. 1 were able to distinguish among emotions and

find slight differences between them and they enlarged the area of the determining factors which they identified for the basic emotions.

Although it generally requires a fine spirit of observation and long term exercise, the technique applied, the combination of visual expressions (whether simple or complex) and the acoustic expressions of the basic emotions proved to be quite a useful tool for the children in the identification of the emotional states of the other people around.

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